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**Pathways of Buddhist Thought**  
**Four Essays**

*Ñāṇamoli Thera*



# Pathways of Buddhist Thought

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by

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# Preface

The essays presented here have been collected from the posthumous papers of the late English Bhikkhu, the Venerable Ñāṇamoli. They are issued in commemoration of his premature death on 8th March 1960, aged 55. A short biographical sketch of the author may be found in a memorial booklet issued by this Society on the occasion of his death.

Since the publication of that memorial booklet, the following translations from the pen of Ñāṇamoli Thera have been issued by the Pali Text Society in London: Minor Readings and Illustrator (Khuddakapāṭha and Commentary), 1960; The Guide (Nettipakaraṇa), 1962; Piṭaka-Disclosure (Peṭakopadesa), 1964, and the Path of Discrimination (Paṭisambhidāmagga), 1982.

While his translations bear witness to the Venerable Author's mature scholarship, the essays here show other aspects of his rich personality. Here is a mind at work that was not satisfied with facile answers, a mind of rare penetrative insight and clarity. It is hoped that these pages will prove stimulating and

helpful to the thoughtful reader.

—*Buddhist Publication Society*

# Buddhism: a Religion or a Philosophy?

Sometimes the question is heard: “Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy?” And sometimes the answer comes readily: “It is a religion.” “But why?” “Well isn’t religion a matter of observances? And the Eightfold Path is largely observance, with Right Speech and so on. So Buddhism is a religion, like any other.” Or it may come just as readily: “It is not a religion; it is a philosophy.” “Why?” “Because it doesn’t rely on blind faith but emphasises understanding. It is the way of Reason. And isn’t Right View philosophy?” Or someone may say: “It is neither a religion nor a philosophy; it is an ethico-philosophical system.” Who is right? Are they all right, some right, or none?

We may have read somewhere that religion is a matter of emotions and that philosophy is rational. If we fly to the dictionaries for help, we may well come away in this case more uncertain than before, as to define “Buddhism,” “religion,” and “philosophy” from the dictionaries is no easy matter. (But if we once begin to

inquire from them what exactly the word "is" implies, we shall soon find ourselves in a pretty tangle, as anyone can see for themselves if they would like to try.)

But if we are not sure what we mean by religion or philosophy (let alone the word "is"), can we attempt to answer the question at all? Suppose we do agree on a meaning for those two words; are we right in supposing that the question is rightly put, and put in such a way that some correct answer is possible if it can be found?

Are, in fact, all religions and philosophies each just *a* religion and *a* philosophy among a crowd, and is Buddhism *necessarily* one among this crowd? What then would be the unique Olympian point of view, able to survey all those religions and philosophies, and able to class them and pigeon-hole them so readily and neatly?

There used to be a recognized type of question in ancient Greece which committed the answerer equally, whether he replied affirmatively or negatively. One was "Do you use a thick stick when you beat your wife? Answer yes or no." Now whether the answer was "Yes" or "No," the retort was "So you *do* beat your wife, then." There are many questions of that type, and some of them not at all evidently so.

Why not pause (there is no hurry) before plumping for a one-sided answer, and take a quick glance at the way in which the Buddha handles and presents his whole teaching.

One thing among many others to be noticed here is that he is careful to spread a net with which to intercept all speculative views. This is the *Brahmajāla*, the “Divine Net,” which as the first discourse of the whole Sutta Piṭaka forms as it were a kind of filter for the mind; or to change the analogy, a tabulation by whose means (if rightly used) all speculative views can be identified, traced down to the fallacy or unjustified assumption from which they spring, and neutralized. This Net, in fact, classifies all possible speculative views (rationalist or irrationalist) under a scheme of sixty-two types.

These 62 types are not descriptions of individual philosophies of other individual teachers contemporary with the Buddha (a number of those are mentioned as well elsewhere in the Suttas), but are the comprehensive net (after revealing the basic assumptions on which these speculative views all grow) with which to catch *any* wrong viewpoints that can be put forward. (Ultimately, these must all be traceable to the contact of self-identification in some form, however misinterpreted, but that cannot be gone into here.)



But why bring in this here, it may well be asked. Because, instead of accepting the question “Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy?” and attempting an answer straight off, we can step back for a moment. We can ask ourselves if, by replying “It is a philosophy,” we may not be making out that the Buddha was actually teaching one of the types of wrong view catchable in the Divine Net, against which that net should protect us. Then the Buddha denounces ritualism (*sīlabbataparāmāsa*) as a vain waste of time bound to lead to disappointment. If we take practice of rites to be a religion, or unjustified and unverifiable emotional beliefs, to then say “Buddhism is a religion” is to imply that Buddhism teaches the very rite-ridden blindness of gullible credulity that the Buddha himself so plainly denounces.

There is, of course, no end to the arguments that can be churned out on both sides. The dialectic goes on oscillating with no resolution, till cut short by sheer weariness, or till some eloquent plea lulls us into thinking the matter is settled once and for all. Or we may just accept one side and forget about it for the time. But it will be reopened again for sure sooner or later, and the dialectic will resume its pendulum-swing. With the best will in the world, though, and the most tireless patience and brilliant dialectic skill, is there really anywhere to go, any solution to be found,

on these lines? What are we to do, then?

In the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Buddha divides questions into four kinds. Some can be answered unilaterally (yes or no). Some have to be analysed before answering. Others must be dealt with by a counter-question (making the questioner produce material out of himself that shows him how things are). And lastly there are some that cannot be answered at all. (They are like the one above about thick and thin sticks, for they make the answerer affirm an assumption, whatever he replies.) These must be entirely set aside.

Now a question, as long as it remains a question, is a dialectic; and when it is answered, the dialectic is unilaterally resolved.

In his fourfold classification of questions (dialectics), the Buddha may be taken to be communicating how to treat dialectics. There are two forms of communication. They have been called the “didactic” and the “existential.” The first says, “This is like this; this is what has to be done,” while the second tends to set forth the basic elements of a situation and leave it to the other to discover for himself the act-of-discovery that can be made on the basis of those elements set forth. Didactically one can tell someone how to cook a dish by communicating the recipe, but

the satisfying of hunger, the discovery of cooking, and how good the dish is in the eating, can only be communicated existentially. It must be lived.

Now to return to the four types of questions and ways of communicating answers, as communicated to us by the Buddha: first, any question is a dialectic. The first type of question is answerable didactically. It is the kind of dialectic where both sides are already evident, which can and ought to be resolved by a unilateral answer (the authority for such a resolution being always accurate observation without forgetting what has been accurately observed). Examples of such unilateral decisions would be: choosing giving and not avarice; choosing kindness, not hate or anger; choosing unilateral keeping of the five precepts unbroken (since the Buddha observed that breaking them entails pain, such being the observable nature of existence for a Buddha who sees how it is), and so on. The highest form in which this unilateral decision is expressed is in the form of the Noble Eightfold Path, in choosing the Right and rejecting the Wrong. (Regarded in this way, the Path appears not as an observance, a rationalist scheme or a duty, but as a practical way to end suffering.) This is a didactic communication which communicates the unilateral resolution of a dialectic for a clear reason without mystification.

The second type of question (that answerable after analysis) can be regarded as a dialectic, one side of which is hidden or partly hidden, both sides of which need bringing clearly to light, and one whose ambiguity should be displayed didactically. Whether it can then be answered, or partly answered, unilaterally is here of secondary importance. The important thing is not to “buy a pig in a poke” by answering unilaterally a question one has not yet fully understood. The doubleness of the dialectic involved, until it has been brought to light by analysis, lurks concealed, can be harmful, and mislead. Such a question would be “Does the Buddha condemn all asceticism?” Before answering, the main debatable points involved should be clearly displayed.

The third type has to be dealt with by a counter-question. It makes the questioner dig out of his own mind the elements that prompt him to ask it. These, when thus brought to light by himself, give him the opportunity to discover how he went wrong in formulating his question. He can discover for himself that the supposed dialectic of his question is fictitious and that the truth lies elsewhere. This is not a didactic communication at all but an existential one. The questioner is not told didactically what to do; he is existentially given the opportunity to discover for himself. (What is discovered may be didactically

communicable, but the act-of-discovery is not.) The Buddha's teaching (that of the Four Truths together) is at heart an existential communication in this sense. (An example would be the "Gaṇaka Moggallāna Sutta," MN 107.)

The fourth type of question, which must be avoided, is that which traps the answerer, either purposely or unwittingly, into affirming an unjustifiable assumption, whether he answers negatively or affirmatively. (It is well recognized in logic how a denial necessarily implies the prior affirmation of what is denied or negated.) The best examples of such questions are this set of four: "Does the Tathāgata exist after death?" "Does he not exist after death?" "Does he both exist and not exist after death?" "Does he neither exist nor not exist after death?" None of these the Buddha consented to answer. "Was it because he was an agnostic?" some people have asked. But that very question shows that the existential communication has failed in the questioner. For besides the fact that to describe the Buddha (the Awakened One) as agnostic is rather a quaint contradiction, the point is overlooked that the four questions about the Tathāgata existing after death or not all contain an assumption which the answers yes and no alike affirm: they are all ultimately begged questions.

We may seem to have by now wandered rather far

from the original query: “Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy?” But two things have come to light. The first is that if we answer in too much of a hurry one way or the other, we may unwittingly be making out that Buddhism “is” either one of the speculative views which are caught by the Buddha’s own Divine Net (the *Brahmajāla*), or that it “is” one of the ritualistic observances of blind faith condemned by the Buddha as bound to disappoint. The second is that, before undertaking to answer, we may ask ourselves which of the four types of questions this one falls under.

Yet before we start doing that, which might well involve us again deeply in dialectics, let us take another look at the way the Buddha sometimes gives his teaching. He was, in fact, asked a question whose essentials were much the same though the details were different. It was the night of the Buddha’s Parinibbāna, and the wanderer Subhadda went to him and asked: “Master Gotama, there are these monks and divines with their congregations, teachers of congregations, famous philosophers whom many regard as saints... Have they all direct acquaintance of what they claim, or none of them, or have some and some not?” The Buddha’s reply was this: “Enough, Subhadda. Let that be. I shall teach you the Dhamma.” And he went on to expound the Eightfold Path. Now the Noble Eightfold Path is one of the Four Noble

Truths. The Noble Truth of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering (which is need), the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (which is cessation of need), and the Noble Truth of the Way leading to cessation of suffering (which is the Eightfold Path). These four Truths (termed “truth” (*sacca*) because they do not deceive, are founded on actual experience and nothing else, and cannot disappoint) are called the “teaching peculiar to Buddhas,” (*Buddhānaṃ sāmukkaṃsika-desanā*), since it is precisely this teaching by which a Buddha is recognizable and distinguished.

Religion tends to rely upon faith alone, and philosophy on understanding alone. But the Buddha, in his teaching of the Truths, stresses the even balancing of five faculties. They are those of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and understanding. While mindfulness can never be overdone, the others, if one-sidedly overdeveloped or repressed, may distort the character, outlook, and spiritual health that resides in their even balancing. Faith alone is blind credulity and gambles against disappointment. Over-exerted energy agitates and distracts. Too much concentration tends to sleep and quietism, while understanding unsupported by the others degenerates into craftiness and cunning. When all are being properly managed, faith functions as confidence in the ability of the others to resist

opposition and to reach their fulfilment in liberation from suffering.

All the five are perfectly familiar because they are present to some extent, however small, in everyone. No one can act at all without at least faith that his act will bring the desired result. Everyone has the energy to show life. Without mindfulness nothing at all could ever be remembered or recognized. Every time we hold a thought for the shortest space of time we concentrate. And no one could ever place their faith at all, however strong or weak, without making some judgment, however bad, where to place it. Such are these five faculties at their bare unescapable minimum. And these same faculties, the Buddha says, “end in the Deathless,” which is the end of greed, hate, and delusion, the end of suffering. They are with us always.

The Eightfold Path has eight factors: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The five faculties are (to repeat) faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and understanding. What has the one set to do with the other? Faith (which is faith in the other four faculties) undertakes the three path factors that constitute virtue, namely right speech, action and livelihood; for these are first undertaken (like any other action) in the



faith that they will lead to the development of the rest and to the ending of suffering. Energy is right effort. Mindfulness is right mindfulness. Concentration is right concentration. Understanding is right understanding and right intention. In this way, the five faculties correspond to the Eightfold Path. They are the Path's raw material. In this way too the Eightfold Path is clearly faith alone, and so is not adequately or rightly described as an observance (observance of ritual), that is, as a religion. It is equally clearly not understanding alone, and so is not adequately or rightly described as purely rationalistic in the sense of limited to logic (suffering is not a logical category, nor is liberation), that is, a philosophy. Again, while it certainly has its ethical and philosophical aspects (the first steps in the Path are right intention, speech, action, and livelihood; the second, mundane right view), and is certainly systematic, not chaotic or incoherent, yet it is not adequately or rightly to be pigeon-holed as an ethico-philosophical system. The Buddha said, "I teach only suffering and the liberation from suffering," and he said, "As the ocean has only one taste, that of salt, so my teaching has only one taste, that of liberation." That seems hardly a mere system.

But is Buddhism a religion or philosophy? Would the reader not like to deal with this for himself?

# Does Saddhā Mean Faith?

## Part I

Sheer ignorance, gullibility, credulity, belief, faith, trust, confidence, certainty, knowledge--set out like that, the words seem to form a sort of spectrum with faith (most disputed of all the shades) somewhere in the middle.

Perhaps it is that very middle aspect of faith which makes it so liable to distortions in opposite directions; for not only is it in the middle in that sense, and not only is it an essential mediating relation between subject and object, but also it stands in between lack of knowledge and the need to know. So some see it only as pure limpid spontaneity of Truth and the noblest Human Faculty, for which no price is too high to pay, while others deride it as a wretched, even worthless, substitute for knowledge. Many try a hand at defining it, arriving at oddly diverse conclusions.

Bewildered from time to time in this way by his

betters, some ordinary man (whose knowledge is limited and who wants to believe something) may ask, "But what does the word 'faith' mean? What are we talking about?" At once the extremists chip in again: "Faith is the Noblest Attribute of Man," "Faith is a drug for fools," "It must be cherished for ever," "It wants chucking out good and proper," they cry. Then the ordinary man, looking for a compromise, mostly uses his native faith in order, ostrich-like, to hide his head in a dune of euphemisms, saying perhaps something about "needing confidence." But "You can't always trust your own ears," he mutters incredulously to himself.

Others less procrustean may say (driving wedges between words) "To believe only in possibilities is not faith," (Sir Thomas Browne after Tertullian), or (making specious definitions of the faculty itself), "Belief, like any other moving body, follows the path of least resistance," (Samuel Butler), or (attempting to define its object), "The essential characteristic of a materialist doctrine is 'belief in something not dependent on our knowledge of it,'" (W.W. Carington, quoting Prof. J.B.S. Haldane, in *Mind, Matter and Meaning*), or else (painting word-pictures), "I've caught belief like a disease; I've fallen into belief like I fell in love," (Graham Greene), and so on. Fanned by these doldrum gusts, the ordinary man drifts this way

and that; he doubts here, puts his faith there, and sometimes he is right and often wrong.

Now a dispassionate glance into matters of the heart is notoriously difficult. But, if the effort is made, it can be perceived that exclamations about “Noblest Attributes” and “wretched substitutes” are just evocative haranguings, ways of trying to push people into thinking as one does oneself, or as one thinks they ought to think (as the case may be), perhaps with the best of motives. They appear as an aspect of human behaviour telling quite a lot about the speaker’s personal attitude, but precious little about faith considered as a component of experience: whether it is, for example, good or bad in itself or unavoidable. Tending covertly as they do to the extremes of rationalism or irrationalism, none of them (not even the subtle ones) examine experience or even attempt an inquiry into why the ordinary man does not just gullibly do as he is told. Why does he not? Is it because, when pushed too far, his common sense tells him that he can’t?

Let us look a little closer. Let us consider for a moment the question of action (of doing, or even saying or thinking, something). An ordinary man sees the past as decided (“What’s done can’t be undone.”), but the future as semi-foreseeable though undecided (“You can never be sure how it will turn out.”). So when he

acts purposively, intending to do what he does (which always happens now), he seems to do so guided by what he remembers of the past and by some measure of faith (or expectation) that his present acts will not have a too inappropriate result in the rather uncertain future. Still he can never be quite sure: doubts haunt him constantly.

That indeed is the pattern of the ordinary human situation: a state of being committed in a changing scene, of (moral) certainty about a definite-seeming past, of present knowledge of acts by restricted free choice which there is no escaping, and of guessing at a more or less indefinite future potentiality, which one hopes (with a grain of justification) to influence because one believes that things will go on happening roughly as they have done. That too is the pattern which makes life valuable and tolerable for the gambler. And who never gambles in his heart?

On that basis, if such a very rough sketch is provisionally accepted, faith (or call it what you will—give a dog a bad name and hang it, but a rose by any other name is just as sweet) as a chancy expectation of results is, it seems, inevitably present in some form in every act done; there would be no doing anything without it. While one has knowledge of what one is doing now, even if it is only that one is sitting still and doubting, faith alone can cope with the unknown

future (as it is apprehended) and decide why one does what one does. Such humdrum faith as that neither needs any special advertising as “noble” nor can it be “chucked out.” It is simply a commonplace necessity.

So it is that parents send children to school in the faith that what is taught there will help the children to make a living. Those same children, when adults, delegate some of their influence by vote to governments in the faith that society will thus cater better for their needs. Through faith in the order of Nature those same adults, when old, sense death edging nearer: an impending ambivalent catastrophe that as surely blots out from their certainty all form of the future as it seems an inescapable plunge into it.

Faith is left a free hand here though men have a general intellectual certainty that their physical death will take place (regardless of any considerations of immortality). Other people’s bodies are seen to die, but, it is pointed out by Freud, the Unconscious, while accepting that, absolutely rejects its own mortality. Though material bodies only too publicly die and disintegrate, at the same time no materialist theory is capable of proving (in any sense of that word) that physical death is the end, or physical birth the beginning, of conscious activity. Hence the ambivalence of the catastrophe. Hence too the fact that faith is forced willy-nilly to exercise a free hand here.

Faith normally manifests itself as one of three particular types of belief, that is, it must absolutely take on one of them so long as there is ignorance and action. It is, (1) a dogma asserting that something of them will survive the catastrophe, or (2) a dogma asserting that nothing of them at all will survive, or (3) radical agnosticism denying that any knowledge beforehand is possible. Depending on which of the types of belief people assume (and one of the three apparently must be assumed) their behaviour will vary. Any act whatsoever, then, involves (where there is ignorance) one of these three assumptions indirectly or directly. To be born is to die, and to live as the ordinary man does is to act; to be in space-time is to be unsure of a future one is sure to encounter.

The reservation "where there is ignorance" has been made, for ignorance, as we shall see, has an organic relation with faith (which is what the ignorant have to rely on in the acts they are obliged to perform). Will anyone deny that the ordinary man is constantly bothered by immediate ignorance (about the weather tomorrow; the contents of an examination paper; what the person he is talking to is thinking; the price of goods next week; whether his memory can be trusted or not; what will happen to him), or that he is ever without some measure of it, let alone ignorance of what is going on beyond his horizons, and may burst

into his world? Then since he cannot avoid doing things ("But what are we going to do, if something happens?"), he has to take risks, to supplement by faith his lack of certain knowledge, to act as if the weather will be such and such tomorrow, and this kind we may call first-degree ignorance, which goes with simple faith. "Take what you will, but pay the price," says Emerson.

But the ordinary man is also subject to desires, needs, fear, and pain. Because he attaches importance to the results of his acts, the lack of certainty inherent in faith is often odious to him (for all that he may like a gamble now and then). Whenever facts do not prohibit his doing so, his desires prompt him to treat the faith, by which he acts, as if it were knowledge ("It's a dead cert!"), and he may well quite honestly forget that he does not know. His defence against fear and pain is forgetting (a mode of ignorance, which, at its deepest, takes the form of death). But if he cannot quite forget, if his forgetting mechanism fails him, he may dope himself with self-deception, refusing both to question his faith and to test its object. This we may call second-degree ignorance, which loses sight not only of the limits of knowledge but of truth as well. With that, his faith has become bad faith. "If bad faith is possible at all," says a modern writer, "it is because it is an immediate and constant threat to every human



project; it is because consciousness hides within its very being a permanent risk of bad faith." Bad faith, however, is not a lie, since the essence of a lie implies that the liar is completely aware of the truth which he dissembles. "One no longer lies when one deceives oneself." Bad faith, in short, both refuses to face all one knows and vetoes any investigation into whether the faith is well placed or not. "O take the cash and let the credit go," says Omar Khayyam's translator. (And if the cash runs out, they'll sure let us live on tie!)

At any time an ordinary man may become fed up with the consequences of misplacing his own faith or by seeing the silly things other people sometimes do out of faith. Blaming the faith instead of the misplacing of it, he may decide to throw it overboard altogether (away with all bath water and babies too), and become a Cynic or a Rationalist. But has he not merely deceived himself once more in fancying it can be jettisoned like that, for he still has ignorance and still has to act? Even despair is no more than a mode of bad faith: faith that the situation is irremediable with refusal to seek an escape. The self-gulling goes on, and so does the risk of disappointment, anger and frustration. If he is healthy, young, and lucky, perhaps he can forget about it and begin all over again. Forgetting is a very useful kind of ignorance: it wipes the bad sums off our slates.

What is the answer, then? Must one either leave the baby unbathed or bottle the bath water? Surely not. The first thing to be done is to reduce ignorance to the "first degree," to become aware that one is ignorant and how one is ignorant, facing up to it courageously and remembering it, regardless of hopes and fears. That is enough for the Goal, isn't it? What more can be done? After all, faith has been shown to be a practical necessity for the ordinary man. Without it indeed all profitable and unprofitable action, as well as all possibility of remedying suffering, must be paralysed. And how richly it ennobles! It is the source of all inspiration. The rapturous leap of faith at Great Moments exhilarates, uplifts, and transfigures. Faith attends all good things. Faith that the very ground will receive one's foot prevents the vertiginous sensation of falling into a chasm every time one steps forward. Faith is Life, and it must be good in itself. How can it be otherwise? If the right dogma can be found, is not that the answer, the realistic answer? Why cry for the moon?

True, faith is a practical necessity for the ordinary man. That is indeed what we have been trying to show. But how can the Right Dogma ever be found, and can it be absolutely trusted without a grain of bad faith as we have described it? And is faith then to be the goal, in which case is ignorance to remain with us

for ever more? Examination of what both the theists and the atheist materialists have offered as dogma from the dawn of history down to the present day, a long time and a wide choice, is far from encouraging (consoling, doubtless but utterly inconclusive). The rather arid alternative seems to be Radical Agnosticism, which is what is usually meant by the phrase "no faith"; no faith, that is, in the heaven the theists offer only after death, or in the substance of matter here and now which the materialists admit can inherently never be known at all and doesn't matter after death anyway.

Why bother, though? Perhaps the world is not such a bad place after all. They say there is plenty of good in it if you look, so forget about the unpleasant side of it. Agnosticism tomorrow, then, and dogma today. "Gather ye roses while ye may," as luck may be on our side.

Dogma or agnosticism. But before we choose, before we risk our faith going bad on us, let us take one more look.

*(Editor's Note: The following handwritten paragraph was found among the late author's papers, together with this essay and carrying the note "above at the end of Pt. 1." Since the insertion of it would have necessitated adjustments in the*

*given manuscript, it was preferable to reproduce this paragraph separately. Its fitting place would be before the second last paragraph of the above text.)*

Then if neither dogma nor agnosticism will do, why not be satisfied with some form of the critical humanism of 18th to 19th century Europe? Criticism has been incalculably productive, and we owe to it all the material advances we enjoy today. It is criticism that has allowed science a free hand to question and experiment. Granted that Criticism (as Inquiry) merits all that praise and far more. But that is as a means. If Criticism is to be made the goal, the summum bonum, against what can it be tested? A fundamental weakness always remains in the position of the critic: if he discloses his own standpoint, that standpoint is open to criticism from some other. That is why it is rare that the academic scholar, who employs the so-called "higher criticism" can afford to state his own position in positive terms. When the English Prime Minister Disraeli was asked what his religion was, it is said that he replied "My religion is that of all wise men." "But what is that, Mr. Disraeli?" "Wise men never say." Criticism requires that the critic be uncommitted, that he is, or pretends he is, outside what he criticises. The professional critic's very being depends on dialectics, the food that keeps him alive is

other people's standpoints. As a means this may be invaluable; as an end it can never amount to more than an ordered form of agnosticism.

## Part II

To "Gather ye roses while ye may," would be fine if there were "roses, roses all the way." But will our simple faith really stretch that far? Hardly.

Soon after the Buddha had attained enlightenment he surveyed the world with the new vision he had achieved. He did not see only roses. He uttered this exclamation: "This world is racked by exposure to the contact [of pain]. Even what the world calls self is in fact ill; for no matter upon what it bases its conceit [of self], the fact is ever other than these [which the conceit conceives]. To be is to become: but the world has committed itself to being, delights only in being; yet wherein it delights brings fear, and what it fears is pain. Now this Life Divine is lived to abandon pain" (Ud 3.10). He was not alone in this estimation of the world: "Here, bhikkhus, some clansman goes forth out of faith [*saddhā*] from the home life into homelessness [considering] 'I am a victim of birth, ageing and death... I am exposed to pain. Surely an end to this

whole aggregate mass of suffering is described?” (MN 29).

Now in this situation how does the Buddha show the function of faith? “One who has faith [*saddhā*] succeeds, Mahānāma, not one who has no faith” (AN 11:12).

Here the question at once intrudes: Is the translation of “*saddhā*” by “faith” justified? Let us try it out and see, for the contexts in which it appears will be the test. We shall be strictly consistent in our renderings. The Buddha speaks of five Faculties, or human potentialities, through whose means an ignorant ordinary man may emerge from ignorance to right understanding, and so from suffering to its cessation. They are faith (*saddhā*), energy, mindfulness, concentration, and understanding (as “mother wit” to start with). If they can be maintained in being against opposition, they are called Powers (SN 48:43). Managed by reasoned attention (*yoniso manasikāra*, awareness of the organic structure of experience), and carefully balanced, they build each other up. Maintained in being and cultivated, they merge into the Deathless (SN 48:57).

The Buddha speaks of faith as one of the Seven Noble Treasures (AN 7:4), one of the Seven True Ideas (DN 33), one of the Five Factors of Endeavour (MN 8), as an

Idea “on the side of enlightenment” (SN 48:51), as a Fount of Great Merit (Aṅguttara ṭīkā 41), as one of the Three Forms of Growth (Aṅguttara ṭīkā 48), which “brings five advantages” (Aṅguttara Pañcaka 38).

And then, “Where is the faith faculty to be met with? Among the four Factors of Stream-entry.” (SN 48:8). “A Stream-enterer [of whom more below] has absolute confidence [pasada] in the Enlightened One, in the True Idea [the Dhamma], and in the Community, and he has the virtue beloved of Noble Ones” (SN 55:1). Four other factors of Stream-entry are frequenting True Men, hearing the True Idea, reasoned attention, and the putting into practice of ideas that are in accordance with the True Idea (SN 55:5).

“What is the faith faculty? Here a noble disciple who has faith places his faith in a Tathāgata thus: ‘This Blessed One is such since he is accomplished and fully enlightened, perfect in true knowledge and conduct, sublime, knower of worlds, incomparable leader of men to be tamed, enlightened, blessed.’” (SN 48:9) “If these five faculties are absolutely perfected, they make an Accomplished One [Arahant]; if a little weaker, a Non-returner; if a little weaker still, a Once-returner; if a little weaker still, a Stream-enterer; if a little weaker still, One Mature in Faith or One Mature in the True Idea” (SN 48:12). “Those who have not known, seen, found, realized, touched with understanding, may go

by faith in others that [these five faculties] when maintained in being and developed merge in the Deathless ... but on knowing, seeing, finding, realizing, and touching with understanding, there is no more doubt or uncertainty that when maintained in being and developed they merge in the Deathless” (SN 48:44).

But then, does not the Buddha say in the Kālāma Sutta, “Come, Kālāmas, [do] not [be satisfied] with hearsay-learning or with tradition or with legendary lore or with what has come down in scripture or with conjecture or with logical inference or with weighing evidence or with choice of a view after pondering it or with someone else’s ability or with the thought ‘The monk is our teacher’”? Is not that an injunction to have nothing to do with faith, to “throw away your books,” as Marcus Aurelius says, and listen to no one at all?

If that statement of the Buddha’s is taken as a general instruction to disregard instruction, it is then impossible to carry out. For then one could only carry it out by not carrying it out (a well-known logical dilemma). But that is not what is intended, as is shown by the rest of the passage: “ ... or with the thought ‘The monk is our teacher.’ When you know in yourselves ‘Certain ideas are unprofitable, liable to censure, condemned by the wise, being adopted and put into effect, they lead to harm and suffering,’ then



you should abandon them ... When you know in yourselves ‘Certain ideas are profitable, not liable to censure, commended by the wise, being adopted and put into effect, they lead to welfare and happiness,’ then you should abide in the practice of them” (Aṅguttara ȳikā 65).

The ordinary man is affected by ignorance, and he cannot dispense with simple faith, though in good faith he may grossly misplace it, or dissipate it, and be said to have no faith (*asaddhā*). But if he places it honestly and reasonably, he is called faithful (*saddhā*). In the Buddha’s words, “A bhikkhu who possesses understanding founds his faith in accordance with that understanding” (SN 48:45), to which words may be added also those of the venerable Sāriputta: “There are two conditions for the arising of right view: another’s speech and reasoned attention” (MN 43). From this it emerges that an ordinary man has need of a germ of “mother wit” in order to know where to place his faith and a germ of unsquandered faith in order to believe he can develop his understanding. That is the starting position.

Faith thus begins to appear as a fusion of two elements: confidence (*pasada*), and what the confidence is placed in. Faith as confidence is elsewhere described as a clearing of the mind, like water cleared of suspended mud by a water-clearing

nut, or as a launching out (*pakkhandana*), like a boat's launching out from the near bank to cross a flood to the further bank, or as a hand that resolutely grasps. (A grain of "mother wit" is needed to recognize the nut, to avoid launching out into a flood that has no other shore, to refrain from grasping a red-hot poker as a stick to lean on). Just as "Seeing is the meaning of the understanding as a faculty," so also "Decision [*adhimokkha*] is the meaning of faith as a faculty." (*Paṭisambhidā Nāṇakatha*). When faith is aided by concentration, "The mind launches out [to its object] and acquires confidence, steadiness and decision" (MN 122).

Choice of a bad object will debauch faith by the disappointment and frustration it entails. Craving and desire can corrupt it into bad faith by the self-deception that it is not necessary to investigate and test the object, and then, as well as error, there is disregard of truth. In one of his great discourses on faith the Buddha says, "Bhāradvāja, there are five ideas which ripen in two ways [expectedly and unexpectedly] here and now. What are the five? They are faith, preference, hearsay-learning, weighing evidence, and choice of a view after pondering it [compare the Kālāma Sutta quoted above]. Now [in the case of faith] something may have faith well placed in it [*susadahita*] and yet it may be hollow,

empty and false; and again, something may have no faith placed in it, and yet it may be factual, true and no other than it seems. In such circumstances it is not yet proper for a wise man to make the conclusion without reserve 'Only this is true, anything else is wrong.' ... If a man has faith, then in such circumstances as these he preserves truth when he says, 'My faith is thus'; but then too he still does not, on that account alone, make the conclusion without reserve, 'Only this is true, anything else is wrong.' He preserves truth in that way too" (MN 95). The other four cases are similarly treated, after which it is shown how "preserving of truth" can be developed successively into "discovery of truth" (path of Stream-entry) and "arrival at truth" (fruit of the path of Stream-entry). The element of confidence has then become absolute because its object has been sufficiently tested by actual experience for the principal claims to be found justified. Another discourse concludes by showing how the value of rightly placed faith serves (as the means rather than the end) in the progress from ignorance to liberation: "Bhikkhus, I say that true knowledge and deliverance have a condition, are not without a condition. What is their condition? The seven Factors of Enlightenment [Mindfulness, interest in the True Idea, energy, happiness, tranquillity, concentration, and onlooking equanimity]. ... What is the condition for these? The

four foundations of mindfulness [contemplation of the body, of feelings, of cognizance, and of ideas] ... What is the condition for these? The three kinds of good conduct [of body, speech and mind] ... What is the condition for these? Mindfulness and full awareness ... What is the condition for these? Reasoned attention ... What is the condition for that? Faith ... What is the condition for that? Hearing the True Idea [the true object of faith, the *saddhāmma*] ... What is the condition for that? Frequenting the company of True Men [*sappurisa*]” (AN 10:62).

This shows plainly the need for a reliable guide. How is he to be found? One should be an Inquirer (*vīmaṃsaka*) and make the Tathāgata the object of research and tests in order to judge whether confidence in him is rightly placed. The Buddha says “Now bhikkhus, if others should ask a bhikkhu [who is an inquirer] ‘What are the evidences and certainties owing to which the venerable one says “The Blessed One is fully enlightened, the True Idea is well proclaimed, the Community has entered upon the good way”?’ then, answering rightly, he would answer thus: ‘Here, friends, I approached that Blessed One for the sake of hearing the True Idea [Dhamma]. The teacher showed me the True Idea at each successively higher [level], at each superior [stage], with the dark and bright counterparts. According as

he did so, by arriving at direct knowledge here of a certain idea [namely, one of the four paths] among the ideas, [taught] in the True Idea, I reached my goal: then I had confidence [*passaddhi*] in the teacher thus: “The Blessed One is fully enlightened, the True Idea is well proclaimed, the Community has entered on the good way.” When anyone’s faith in a Tathāgata is planted and rooted and established with these evidences, these phrases and these syllables, then his faith is called supported by evidence, rooted in vision, sound, and invincible by Monk or Divine or Māra or Divinity or anyone in the world” (MN 47).

Faith as the indispensable means, but not the goal, transparent in itself, is debased or ennobled by the mode of its employment and by its goal. As understanding grows, it approximates to knowledge, while the risk of its degenerating into bad faith diminishes with the diminishing of craving.

But there are still two problems. First, it was argued earlier that faith involves not knowing the future. So if faith becomes knowledge, does that not imply that the future can all be known and is therefore predetermined? Second, with craving unabated would not knowledge of everything be unbearable; would it not be Hell itself? How does craving diminish?

The key to these two locks on the gate of liberation lies

in the Contemplation of Impermanence. Let us take the second problem first. It is part of the constraint imposed by ignorance and craving together that an ordinary man is led to speculate on time and permanence, and to ask such questions as, “What was I?” “What shall I be?” “What am I?” (MN 2), unanswerable questions to which philosophers go on furnishing many an unquestionable answer, disproving each other as they do. But progress towards liberation from ignorance transforms and transfigures the world. One who is liberated asks no more questions (*akathamkathī*). The Buddha tells his listeners, “Bhikkhus, material form [and likewise feeling, perception, determinations, and consciousness] are impermanent, changing and altering. Whoever decides about, and places his faith in, these ideas in this way is called Mature in Faith. He has alighted upon the certainty of rightness. He has alighted upon the plane of true men and left behind the plane of ordinary men. He can no more perform action capable of causing his rebirth in the animal world or in the realm of ghosts and he cannot complete his time in this life without realizing the fruition of Stream-entry” (SN 25:10). Such faith decides in advance that nothing arisen can reveal any permanence at all, however brief. Since all subsequent evidence supports the decision, if that evidence is not

forgotten, craving is progressively stultified in the impossibility of finding any arisen thing worth craving for, and is progressively displaced by the joy of liberation. The first problem, though, that of time, is properly a matter for insight (vipassanā) and can only be dealt with here by hints and pointers because of lack of space. As has already been said, the ignorant man questions, but one who is liberated does not. The Buddha tells his listeners, “Let not a man trace back a past or wonder what the future holds ... Instead with insight let him see each idea [1] presently arisen” (MN 131). He includes the Contemplation of Impermanence under the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: “He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in ... breathe out contemplating impermanence’” (MN 10).

Now it is in the very nature of ignorance to perceive the bare conditions for consciousness in terms of things, persons and hypostases, and to project upon these percepts a varying degree of permanence, a misperception which it is the task of true vision and mindfulness to correct. During the period of transition, while understanding that “to be is to be otherwise” is still immature and helped out by faith in the impermanence of everything that is, the faith must be tested and the outcome of the tests remembered. This needs concentration and energy.

“When one gives attention to impermanence, the faith

faculty is outstanding.” And in the cases of attention to pain and not-self the faculties of concentration and understanding are outstanding respectively. These are called the “Three Gate-Ways to Liberation,” which “lead to the outlet from the world” (*Paṭisambhidā Vimokkhakathā*). When the Stream-entry path is reached, a new, supramundane faculty, the I-shall-come-to-know-the-unknown faculty (*anaññātaññassāmītindriya*) appears, to be subsequently followed by the new and supramundane final-knowledge and final-knower faculties (*aññindriya*, *aññātāvindriya*). These are gained in this life with the attainment of Arahantship.

Meanwhile, however, “The characteristic of impermanence does not become apparent [as universal] because, when the constant rise and fall of determinations [2] [things] is not given attention, it is concealed by continuity (*Visuddhimagga* Ch. 21). In fact the Buddha said, “There is no matter or feeling, perception, determinations, or consciousness whatever that is permanent ... not inseparable from the idea of change [3] ... ” Taking a small piece of cow dung in his hand, the Blessed One said, “If there were even that much ... that were permanent ... not inseparable from the idea of change [4] ... the living of the Life Divine [5] could not be described as for the exhaustion of suffering. It is because there is not ...



that it is so described” (SN 22:96).

Now that statement can be taken to imply that if time were an absolutely independent objective reality, there would be no liberation.

Permanence and impermanence on the one hand, and time on the other, are but two modes of the same view. The appearance of the three new supramundane faculties signals profound changes in the apprehension of permanence and impermanence, that is, of time, and consequently in actual experience itself.

To question the objectivity of time is not new even to Western philosophy. While objective reality of time and space still remains one of the assumptions made by scientists for which they have no proof, Immanuel Kant argued irrefutably for the pure subjectivity of both. But almost a millennium and a half before him, Ācariya Buddhaghosa wrote, “What is called ‘time’ is conceived in terms of such and such dhammas ... But that [time] should be understood as only a mere conceptual description, since it is nonexistent as to any individual essence of its own.” (*Atthasālinī*. Space is analogously treated elsewhere). A century or two later it was observed that “Nibbāna [extinction] is not like other dhammas. In fact because of its extreme profundity it cannot be made the object of

consciousness by one who has not yet reached it. That is why it has to be reached by change-of-lineage cognizance [gotrabhū], which has profundity surpassing the three periods of time” (*Mūlaṭīkā*). When the seen, heard, sensed and cognized (see Ud 1.10), are misperceived to be (this that I see ... that I think about, is that man, so-and-so, that thing of mine, to have temporal endurance and reality, it is because the three periods of time, these three modes by which we subjectively process our raw world in perceiving it, have been projected outwards by ignorance on the raw world and misapprehended along with that as objectively real. That is how we in our ignorance come to perceive things and persons and action.

These fragments are merely pointers. The contemplation of impermanence, which, when fully and unreservedly developed, necessitates the contemplations of suffering (pain) and not-self, involves the whole field of insight. (There is no space to deal with it here.) However, the inquiry has already led us away from the apparent either-or choice between faith in dogma-as-the-goal or agnosticism. By establishing a structural interdependence between faith and ignorance, it has opened up a new line. In the pursuit of that line it has uncovered an unexpected association between faith and the temporal mirage of permanence and impermanence. And so it has been

possible to sketch a practical outline of the way to end here and now this whole aggregate mass of suffering. The adventure is waiting to be tested.

“Fruitful as the act of giving is ... yet it is still more fruitful to go with confident heart for refuge to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and undertake the five precepts of virtue ... Fruitful as that is ... yet it is still more fruitful to maintain loving-kindness in being in the heart for only as long as the milking of a cow ... Fruitful as that is ... yet it is still more fruitful to maintain perception of impermanence in being for only as long as the snapping of a finger” (AN 9:20).

But does *saddhā* really mean faith? Let the reader judge for himself.

# Cessation of Becoming

## (With a Note on Faith)

Why do normal people normally react with panic and horror to the idea of cessation of becoming, or cessation of consciousness? There are at least two reasons. There is first the failure to see both sides of life, the negative/destructive as well as the positive/constructive, which are (as it were) the obverse and reverse of each piece of experience. It is a refusal to face the ambivalence of experience, and a putting on of blinkers to shut out, as far as one can, what is disturbing. It is by this that life is made to look nice, and appears tolerable. The process is largely automatic and subconscious, so it is seldom ever enquired into. With the blinkers on one does not see what is unwelcome and one quickly forgets the unwelcome that intrudes.

And here I want to distinguish two kinds of suffering: (1) enjoyable suffering and pain (the arduousness of exhausting sports, self mortification, "being ill,"

masochism and sadism, etc.), which are not properly suffering because they are enjoyed and welcomed; and (2) horror or nausea, which is all those things (whatever they may be, and they vary with different people) that produce horror, nausea, and vertigo, because they are absurd and menace the core and pattern of our personal existence. Everyone knows that border across which he cannot go, even in thought, and it is that, not the former, that people automatically shut out and cannot face. Yet one knows at times (in the middle of the night, perhaps, when one is sleepless, or on encountering some revolting experience) that this horror haunts every form of experience (always and ever), and hastily one readjusts the blinkers that had slipped. Put the beautiful before you and the horror behind you. Yes, but then I shall not dare to turn round.

The world is a bad place. Is it? But it seems that this haunting, this self-delusion by wearing blinkers, is not an attribute of the world. The haunting is in consciousness itself, in its very nature. Just as when I set up any object in the sunlight a shadow is cast (because it is the nature of sunlight to cast shadows), so anything that comes into the light of consciousness casts a shadow of the unknown. It is in the unknown that the horror resides in the dark of knowledge where the patterns can no longer be traced, where chaos

resides, and whence utterly hostile systems may emerge, devour, and digest us.

Again this insecurity resides in consciousness because it cheats. It lives between the past and the future like a reflection between two opposing mirrors. I put my head between the opposing mirrors and I see the reflection of the reflection of the reflection ... which suggests recession to infinity. But I cannot see that infinity because (even if the glasses were clear enough) my head and its reflections are in the way. But then if I slightly displace one mirror so that my head is no more in the way then the series of reflections passes out of the field of the mirrors at some stage of the reflections which it must now do (unless the mirrors are made of infinite size). So I am forced by this set of experiences to infer an infinity of which the very circumstances deny the possibility of my experiencing. That is one essential aspect of consciousness: it cheats.

Another example is the moon. I see as an experience an existent crescent, an existent half-moon, or full moon, and there are perceptions of existents that are repeated (which are in fact over and done with as soon as experienced). Consciousness groups together these repeated experiences and forms a concept that transcends all these possible existents, and which it presents as "the moon." But "the moon" can never be experienced, and even when visualized it is only as

one of its aspects. It is a fake. This concept “the moon” is then projected upon the objective world where it appears to lurk behind existence as Kant’s “*Ding an sich*,” or, say, Eddington’s “reality,” that the physicists are trying to discover behind what they investigate. Suppose a man gets lost in a desert and he wanders all night. When the sun comes up he may see lots of tracks in the sand all pointing the way he is going. He thinks, “Marvellous! I am on the high road. Lots of people have gone this way already. I am alright.” So he follows them. They are, in fact, his own tracks made in the night by his walking in circles (which people actually do). If he does not stop to consider and goes on following them, he will get nowhere. He will die. If he put aside his assumption and looked about him, it is possible he might find the way of escape.

This is what I mean by the failure to see both sides of life, to see things and ourselves as they and we really are, in their relationship. This is what Māra (if we like personification) tries his utmost to keep us from seeing, for it is by this that we can slip out of his clutches. Māra is Death, but he is also Life, for “all that is subject to arising is subject to cessation,” “all that is born and lives dies.” Byron said somewhere:

Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most  
Must mourn the deepest o’er the fatal Truth.  
The Tree of Knowledge is not that of life.

But it is Māra that makes us mourn because he makes his living by that, just as a rubber estate owner makes his living by the trees that he cultivates and bleeds, and cuts down when they are old.

But there is another, equally fundamental, reason that makes people shy away from the notion—their notion—of cessation. This is a very deep-rooted double misconception: (1) there is the idea that by “cessation,” by “extinction,” something “good” and “valuable” and “lasting” will be “lost forever,” and (2) there is an uncritical assumption that consciousness will somehow continue to survive—will be “there”—to be aware of this as an “everlasting privation.” “Does all this” they say “only end in extinction? But a state of nothingness is horrible!” and there the whole double misconception lies like a pair of Siamese Twins in a bed. But there is, in the last analysis, no “entirely good” and “lasting” individual thing or state discoverable anywhere. Whatever appears good melts away in the end. The subconscious cheating of the mind seizes on the good, rejects and forgets it, and it melts away. By a “sleight of mind” that is one of consciousness’s essential functions, the idea is presented that it is possible to skim the good off the world, like cream on a bowl of milk, and live in that cream in “eternal bliss.” But, alas, like the cream, the bowl of heavenly bliss is not permanent. Such is the



“good” that is supposed to be “lost.” And then there is the instinctive feeling, the uncritical automatic reaction that takes cessation somehow to mean a survival of conscious awareness of that loss, in spite of the fact that the proposition was in the first place “cessation of consciousness.” This is the verbal-mental subconscious cheating that has only to be examined fearlessly to see it as a mere self-contradiction. If consciousness ceases and with it its objects, there is no question of conscious awareness of privation. If there is awareness of loss and privation, consciousness has not ceased, and it is not such cessation that is being talked about. This misconception (often enough believed in due to uncritical acceptance) is often used to deride Buddhists without seeing that it hurts only him who uses it. And not only Buddhists, for Saṅkāra in his commentary to the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad says: “The Buddhists themselves do not deny the existence of gods and heavens [or hells]—they are not atheists—but only that the gods are omnipotent or ever-lasting: they change and die, let one down, make one let oneself down, because they cannot help it, because consciousness and its objects, with its disease of impermanence, are there too.”

Consciousness without object is impossible, not conceivable, and objects without consciousness, when talked about, are only a verbal abstraction. One cannot

talk or think about objects that have no relation to consciousness. The two are inseparable and it is only a verbal abstraction to talk about them separately (legitimate of course in a limited sphere).

But it is in the consideration of this cessation as the goal that the real comfort and safety are to be found. There is no cheating here, and no anxiety to exclude haunting opposites. All else, however good it seems, is only temporary, because there is consciousness there to know and to change. So there is no permanent safety of attack or harm, and there is no permanent safety from one's being led to do harm, even if that harm is merely changing.

Regarding the matter of faith, it is commonly felt and often stated that faith is a weakness, a mere substitute for knowledge, a "blind belief in dogma" and "unnecessary." But the point overlooked is that there is an element of faith in every conscious act. It is another of the false aspects inherent in all consciousness: the presenting of objects in such that the perception of them necessitates inference about what is hidden. This is in fact an aspect of faith. Without this faith nothing can be done at all, viz. faith that things will repeat themselves and happen as one expects. But the case is most clearly seen in the case of death. Death is an obvious fact. Described in terms of life, it is meaningless (like a blank featureless wall, or a

black chasm to vision), but nevertheless by its very existence, by its basis in experience, necessitates inference about it. The three main inferences are that life of some sort continues after death, that it does not, or plain agnosticism. Whichever I adopt is a matter of pure faith (I leave out “evidence” for and against other alternatives here). But I cannot avoid adopting one of the three.

On the other hand, faith about, say, “phoenixes rising from their own ashes” is simply this same universal attribute of consciousness applied to a fantasy, an assumption (the phoenix) that has no basis in experience. What is unnecessary here is not the faith but the assumption. Now many faiths place faith in baseless assumptions. And when people discover this, they not only reject the assumption (rightly), but, because they fail to discriminate, they deceive themselves into thinking that they can do without the faith too. All that has happened to them, though, is that they have transferred their faculty of faith to the basis of experience and have simultaneously forgotten that they are using it. Now to forget that one has a sharp knife in one’s hand is dangerous. [6]

# Consciousness and Being

What follows will have to be stated in terms of ordinary speech, though that necessarily involves the word “is” and logical constructions, because speech is hardly possible without them. Nevertheless they have to be regarded here as a makeshift, and the whole of what follows tends to undermine the ultimate value of speech, retaining it, however, as a necessity for communication in conditions where separateness and individuality predominate.

The word “consciousness,” it seems to me, can only refer to what one might define provisionally as “the knowing that cannot know itself without intermediary and that cannot function in experience (of which it is an indispensable component) except negatively.”

To the question “What is consciousness,” then, a low level provisional answer might be “It is the pure subjective” or “It is the bare knowing of what it is not that constitutes (orders) experience and allows it being.” It must be added that, when consciousness is, it seems to be individualized by what it knows. But on

another (higher) level the “is” in the question has still to be questioned, and so the low-level (and logical) answer is only a conventional makeshift, a conventional view, nothing more. And this qualification applies not only to logically inductive and deductive statements necessitating use of the word “is,” but also to descriptive statements that appear in “logical” form, using that term, or any equivalent.

When I ask myself, “What does the verbal expression ‘universal consciousness’ refer to?” I confess to be unable to find an answer, because, in spite of its “attractive” form, I cannot distinguish it from non-consciousness (see below). So I seem to have no alternative but to regard the phrase as one of those abstract expressions that appear on the surface to mean something, but when more closely examined, do not. (This, I know, may seem shocking, but I am more interested here in finding the facts than in avoiding shock.)

The more I examine and observe experience (What else can one do? Build castles?), the more I find that I can only say of consciousness (and in this I find a notable confirmation in the Pali Suttas) that it seems only describable (knowable) “in terms of what it arises dependent upon” (i.e. seeing-cum-seen ... mind-knowing-cum-mind, known or mind cum-ideas), that

is, negatively as to itself. And so, instead of being said to appear, it should rather be called that negativeness or “decompression of being” which makes the appearance of life, movement, behaviour, etc., and their opposites, possible in things and persons. But while life, etc. cannot be or not be without the cooperation of the negative presence of consciousness, which gives room for them (and itself) to “come to be” in this way (gaining its own peculiar form of negative being, perhaps from them)—the only possible way of being—they are, by ignorance, simultaneously individualized in actual experience. Unindividualized experience cannot, I think, be called experience at all. Thus there appears the positive illusion also of individual consciousness: “illusion” because its individuality is borrowed from the individualness of (1) its percepts, and (2) the body seen as its perceiving instrument.

Unindividualized perception cannot, any more, I think, be called perception at all. The supposed individuality of consciousness (without which it is properly inconceivable) is derived from that of its concomitants. This illusory individualization of consciousness, this mirage, manifests itself in the sense both of “my consciousness” and of “consciousness that is not mine” (as e.g. in the sensation of being seen when one fancies or actually finds one is caught, say,

peeping through a keyhole, and from which the abstract notion of universal consciousness develops). The example shows that the experience of being seen does not necessarily mean that another's consciousness is seeing one, as one may have been mistaken in one's fancy owing to a guilty sense (though the experience was just as real at the time), before one found no one was there. To repeat: my supposed consciousness seems only distinguishable from the supposed consciousness that is not mine on the basis of the particular non-consciousness (i.e. material body, etc.) through which its negativity is manifested and with which it is always and inevitably associated in some way. It is impossible, I think, to overemphasize the importance of this fact. So of the concept, "universal consciousness," I at present think that the word "universal" misleads. (Perhaps some hidden desire for power to "catch all consciousness in the net of one's understanding," and so escape the horrors of the unknown, seduces one to catch at this seemingly attractive term.)

Again it may be asked: What knows universal consciousness? Would not individual consciousness (if the "universal" is accepted) be held inadequate to judge it? And how can it know itself, or what are the means by which it can know itself and distinguish itself from non-consciousness and individual

consciousness? I can find no answer to that and so I conclude that, if I ask it, that is simply because I must have started out with an unjustified assumption about the nature of consciousness (which, platitudinous as it may seem, is horribly difficult to understand and handle in view of its negativity; when one talks about “consciousness” normally, one finds on examination that one has not been talking about it at all but about the positive things like pleasure and pain, action, perception, etc., that always accompany and screen it). Is the question then really necessary? Consciousness, of course, cannot be denied as a necessary constituent of experience, but the trouble starts when we begin to ask what consciousness (or its nature) is. We have assumed the individuality of consciousness, apparently unjustifiably, because of the observed individuality of the objective part of experience through which we say it is manifested; and the assumption of its individuality logically leads to the further assumption of some universal form. Why?

Now, as I said earlier, when I begin to ask what something is (is, say, consciousness individual, universal, both, or neither?), we have taken being for granted and failed to examine the nature of a part of my question. In one sense consciousness seems correctly describable as functioning (that is in its true negativity) by putting everything in question: What is



this? What am I? What is life? What is consciousness? What is being? Now here the emphasis must be removed from "what" and "this" and placed squarely on "is." Suppose I suggest this: for "is" read "belief-attitude" (as a mode of craving combined with ignorance). In other words, it is the nature of consciousness to make be (with the aid of desire-for-being and of ignorance-of-how-anything-comes-to-be) and the nature of being to depend on consciousness. The multiplicity and the contradictoriness of the answers normally given to these questions ought to be sufficient evidence for something of the sort, or at least for the suspicion, that all the methods of answering them in the way normally done are radically wrong in some way. In fact the contradictory answers in all their variety, as usually given, each bolstered up by logic, betray, it seems to me, just that form of ignorance-craving combination which make perception/non-perception, change/immortality, time/eternity, life/death, action/inaction, choice/fatality, unity/variety, individuality/universality, seem not only possible but real. (It then seems necessary or "right" [here we have craving] to determine what among these is [here we have ignorance] real and what is not.) And the trouble begins again: I begin asserting "I am this, I am not that," "This is that," "A is B," "Consciousness is life," "Truth is beauty," "Life

is good," "Killing is right," "The end is the justification of the means," "I am," "God is," etc., all of which others may deny. Perhaps we get angry and come to blows. How many more people in history have been killed for the sake of opinions about what is and what is not than have been killed for the sake of facts?

Viewpoints, interpretations, and opinions about the raw material of experience differ, less or more, from individual person to individual person. The more consistent and logically strengthened any moral, religious, or philosophical system becomes, the more possible it becomes for it to be contradicted by an opposing system. And then bare craving has to arbitrarily choose and bash the opponent on the head if it can. That is why Buddhism (especially Nāgārjuna, but also Theravada) favours a dialectic that pulls down all such positivistic- negativistic systems (the positive is always haunted by the negative, and so there is really no true *via negativa* or *via positiva* in any absolute sense). It pulls them down using their own premises.

Of whatever I can say that it is, by that very fact I imply that it is not: It is this, is not that. It then is in virtue of what it is not, being so constituted by the consciousness that determines it thus. But the consciousness on which its being depends is negative, whose negativity appears in objective things as their

temporality and change, the change in their being. But while the being of whatever is objective to it appears as positive, even though it may change, its own being appears as a negation of itself and a denial, flight or movement, the temporalizing of the temporalized objective world.

Now, perhaps, you will understand why it is really impossible for a Buddhist to answer the questions, “Does Buddhism teach the extinction of consciousness? Is nibbāna the extinction of consciousness?” On the basis of what has been said above, could it be answered yes or no without examining each term of the question?

There is, of course, another, different approach to the analysis of (not the answer to) that question: Why should consciousness (however conceived) seem preferable to cessation-of-consciousness (however conceived)? Consciousness of deprivation, of an “abyss of nothingness,” is not cessation of consciousness. Would not any preference (absolute one-sided choice) for one over the other show craving in the aim if that were set up as the ultimate aim? The desire-to-end-craving, as I see it, is a provisional measure adopted while craving is still present in order to use craving to terminate itself, while the aim is absence-of-craving and consequently ending of suffering. Use of the word is (which implies presence

of ignorance) in this way is also use of present ignorance to terminate itself, while the aim is (to me in this state) liberation from ignorance.

Second, suppose a state of consciousness without suffering. Would it not have to be entirely without change since the slightest change in the state must imply a degree of suffering intruding. But can a state of consciousness absolutely without change be distinguished at all from absence of consciousness? I do not see how it can. However a mixture of longing for the incompatible (craving) and fear of or disinclination to face the facts of the association and complexity which are inseparable from conscious experience (ignorance) can make it seem as possible and realizable as the catching of the red in a rainbow with a butterfly net. So out we go with our butterfly nets chasing colour ... and get wet instead. Craving and ignorance persist in heaven, though suffering may be suspended there for a time.

That is how I see Emerson's "Take what you will but pay the price," viz. "Pay death as the price of life," or "Pay suffering as the price of consciousness." May get it on loan, but if one does not pay up when the bill comes in, the bailiffs distraint. But that does not mean that I think one should counter with undiminished craving and ignorance and use them to denounce life, consciousness, etc. I say one should take them as they

are and develop understanding of them. That, as I see it, and only that, along with the sharing of it, is the true source of joy, not joy of life haunted by fear of loss-of-consciousness, and so on. This you know, so I am not saying anything new.

If I ask myself "Is it possible for me to end consciousness?" I have to reply to myself that I see no possibility at present. (What might happen if I succeeded in ending craving and ignorance, of which I see no prospect at present, is, of course, hard to say!) If the possibility were available now, I at present see no sound reason why I should not avail myself of it. Pure speculation! Yes, but at least it prevents me coming down one-sidedly in favour of consciousness or in favour of non-consciousness in the crude mode. I do regard death (my life's end, murder, or suicide) as the ending of consciousness: to presume that conscious continuity (negativity) ends because a particular continuity of its material objective world (including its body) ends seems to me a pure assumption whose opposite is just as valid, with possibly better logical arguments in favour of it if the evidence is observed without bias. However, what happens to me at death cannot be known. Consequently I am at liberty to assume (since I cannot avoid assuming something about it) what seems most reasonable. Death seems above all to be forgetting. I do not know. But since I

have to believe something about it whether I like it or not, I do not believe that consciousness ends with death. Memory may well do so. I don't, however, know that this is what I want not to believe.

It is, I think, rather important to bear in mind one thing in regard to what has been said above. With this view there are two scales of value (not so much divorced as crossing at right-angles) which must be carefully discriminated. The physical world of consciousness-being- action in which we live and are, biased by ignorance and propelled by craving, is governed by perception of being and the practical values based on that. But any positive metaphysical system, whether based only logically or emotionally on it, which is founded on that, is haunted by the shadows that it cannot avoid casting and that it cannot itself see (like the Sun). It acts in virtue of cause and effect and its thought is logical by its dependence on the word "is." As far as we live in this world we have to live its mode and by its values, or we risk falling into wells through star-gazing. But none of its laws are made absolute (without divorcing idea from experience). The Void, of which it cannot be said that it is or is not, nor that it has consciousness or has none, while it denies absoluteness to any experiential value (alike to being and to consciousness) cannot be identified. And that is the doctrine of not-self (*anattā*)

as I see it in one aspect at present. This voidness cannot be “is-ed” and so introduced into the worldly scheme, except as the denial of absoluteness of all particular values. It has no more effect on ordinary life than the theory of relativity. But just as that theory completely alters calculation of enormous speeds, so, as I see it, this void-element completely alters calculations of extraordinary situations, of death (as killing, suicide or the partner of old age).

—*Written in June 1957*

# Notes

1. Dhamma: “thing” or phenomenon, material or mental. (Ed.) [\[Back\]](#)
2. *Sañkhāra* is usually translated as “formations,” or, in the case of the Five Aggregates, “mental formations.” (Ed.) [\[Back\]](#)
3. *Viparināmadhamma*, usually translated as “subject to change.” (Ed.) [\[Back\]](#)
4. *Ibid.* [\[Back\]](#)
5. *Brahmacariya* is usually translated as “Holy Life” or “Life of Purity.” (Ed.) [\[Back\]](#)
6. Here the manuscript ends. This undated fragment (which in the manuscript, follows immediately after the preceding essay) may have stimulated the author to treat the subject more fully in the essay “Does Saddhā mean Faith?” included in this publication. (Ed.) [\[Back\]](#)



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